DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 148 SO 031 949

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TITLE Ofrendas/BorderCrossings: A Studio-Based Model for Cross Cultural Traveling.
INSTITUTION Australian Inst. of Art Education, Melbourne.
PUB DATE 1999-09-00
NOTE 7p.; Paper presented at the Annual World Congress of the International Society for Education through Art (InSEA) (30th, Brisbane, Australia, September 21-26, 1999). This paper has been assisted by the Commonwealth Government through the Australian Council for the Arts, its art funding and advisory body.
AVAILABLE FROM Australian Institute of Art Education, C/Suite 125, 283 Glenhuntley Road, Eisternwick, VIC 3185, Australia.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Art Expression; *Art Products; *Artists; *Cultural Context; *Exhibits; Models; Multicultural Education
IDENTIFIERS Borderlands; Contact Zones; Dia de los Muertos; *Multicultural Materials

ABSTRACT

While creating an art form which is foreign to an artist's cultural expression may seem like taking a risk in today's world, it may provide a way to successfully negotiate a fulfilling living and working space on this diverse planet. Movement into a foreign space, often referred to as a border crossing, can be understood as a central meeting space. This paper discusses the 1998 exhibition at the Maitland Art Center in Florida, "Ofrendas/Border Crossings," where 20 Latino and non-Latino artists made ofrendas, or Day of the Dead altars. The exhibition can serve as a model for multicultural education beyond the code signifying the inclusion of non-white races and ethnicities, which negatively reinforces a white/other binary dynamic. The paper tells the stories of many of the artists who made and exhibited ofrendas, finding that all of the artists felt they had traveled to a new space and had negotiated the territory for their benefit. It suggests that this new space can act as a "contact zone" that dissolves bigotry based on simplistic cultural conceptions. Contains 14 references. (BT)

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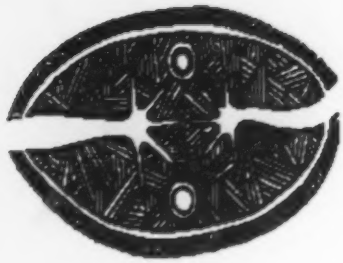

"Ofrendas/BorderCrossings: A Studio-Based Model for Cross Cultural Traveling"

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Proceedings from the InSEA 30th World Congress "Cultures and Transitions"

21-26 September 1999
Brisbane Australia

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OFRENDAS/BORDERCROSSINGS: A STUDIO-BASED MODEL FOR CROSS CULTURAL TRAVELING

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For decades art educators have in various ways championed the goals of multi-cultural education. But teachers also often tread lightly around unfamiliar territory, fearful that they may cause controversy and discomfort in the classroom or community. Some educators, while attempting, appropriately and respectfully, to give visibility to cultures other than their own, may miss the mark because of a lack of contextual knowledge. While studying art that may be "prickly" "or "risky" in certain settings, it almost always seems easier to present it in lessons focused on art history or art criticism. When writing about another culture, it is easier to distance oneself than it is when engaging in a studio activity. However, while creating an art form which is foreign to an artist's cultural expression may seem like taking a risk in today's world, it may provide us with a way to successfully negotiate a fulfilling living and working space on our diverse planet. Movement into a foreign space, often referred to as a border crossing, can be understood as a central meeting space. In the words of Guillermo Gómez-Peña (1993), reflecting on this meeting space, "The border is the juncture, not the edge, and the monoculturalism has been expelled to the margins" (p. 44).

In this paper, I will discuss the 1998 exhibition at the Maitland Art Center in Maitland, Florida, "*Ofrendas*/Border Crossings" where twenty artists, Latinos and non-Latinos, made *ofrendas* or Day of the Dead altars that, somehow, for each artist crossed borders. This exhibition can serve as a model for becoming successfully involved in studio-based, cross-cultural curriculum. It is an attempt to move multicultural education beyond a code signifying the inclusion of non-white races and ethnicities, which negatively reinforces a white/other binary dynamic (Friedman, 1988).

To use the words of Giroux (1992), what we want to do when we engage in border crossings is to "transfigure" rather than "disfigure" (p. 29). For example, we do not wish to make out-of-context kachina dolls or totem poles if we are not Hopi or Haida. If we are not Hopi or Haidi, we cannot culturally become Hopi or Haidi very readily. And the making of a kachina doll or a totem pole that holds meaning in the rooted and ritualistic manner of the tradition bearers becomes impossible. However, this cultural discrepancy does not mean that non-Hopi or non-Haidi cannot approach the form of the kachina doll or totem pole in a respectful manner. Border crossings encourage fusion, flux, and cross-cultural dialogue (Gómez-Peña, 1996). In fact, Friedman (1998) claims that border crossings, grounded in feminist migratory activity, need to resist "the tendency of theory to fix, schematize, organize, taxonimize, and stabilize the fragmentation and fluidity of thinking and living" (p. 102).

While viewing theory and culture as fluid, we must also learn to view difference as something other than otherness. Difference, according to Minh-Ha (1991) should imply interdependency. "I am like you; I am different from you" (p. 152). It is a working out of sensibility that places the margins in the center. It is a kind of consciousness where the new starting point relocates us in a different space. We recognize that as teachers, we operate, as Stout (1997) suggests, "within a personalized context fraught with limitations" (p. 105). These are not stigmas, but restrictions owned by every human being. The challenge, then, is to broaden and move beyond these restrictions, as best we can. We do that, in part, by looking for common qualities of identity. This was the approach Catalina Delgado-Trunk took in curating the Maitland Art Center exhibition, "*Ofrendas*/Border Crossings."

Ofrendas are altars, most traditionally Mexican, that are created to celebrate the Day of the Dead on the first and second day of November. Mortals invite dead loved ones to join them in a harmonious celebration. The *ofrenda* is an intertwining of the spiritual world with the mundane, everyday world (Congdon, Delgado-Trunk, & Lopez, 1999). Mesa-Baines (1997) explains that there while *ofrendas* can be visually very different, there are similarities. These include "the use of canopies or ceiling treatments, which may be expressions of celestial imagery; the serialization of objects in formal arrangements; the emphasis on natural or aged

surfaces which reflect a relationship with time and erosion; the balance between scale and volume; and the continuous presence of memorial materials" (p. 126). Often placed on the altar are skeletons involved in all kinds of everyday activities.

The twenty artists involved in the *Ofrenda*/Border Crossings exhibition began with a knowledge of altar spaces. We all understood roadside crosses, focal points in religious spaces, and could even recognize altar-like installations placed on television sets, computers, and around kitchen sinks. We were familiar with impromptu public altar spaces like ones created for Princess Diana, Susan Smith's children, or more recently, John Kennedy Jr. As one artist, known quite well to most of us, had been miraculously battling cancer for years, the borderland between life and death did not seem to be foreign or as exotic to the rest of us. We readily realized that the border crossings that should be confronted in this exhibition should incorporate the space between life and death as well as the space between Mexican and non-Mexican. We also wanted to allow even more, expanded kinds of border crossing interpretations. Whatever boundaries were to be crossed, we understood, would incorporate what has been referred to by many as "traveling" (Friedman, 1998). "Traveling," in this manner of speaking, can be physical, as in dealing with geographic borders, psychological, or cultural. Most of us are aware of the widespread use of the idea of traveling as making a pilgrimage. In this usage of the word, we go on a journey to find a new kind of meaning. The idea of traveling has been used by White and Congdon (1998) to demonstrate how the boundaries of art categories can be deconstructed as one's emphasis on the art is refocused. In our study, we found that both so-called folk artists and fine artists traveled, in numerous kinds of ways, thereby blurring fixed categorization.

When traveling, the movement involves a shift between sameness and difference, creating a new, relational kind of identity. It is about expanding on one's roots and moving beyond the boundaries of "home." Friedman (1998) explains that the borderlands where geopolitical traveling takes place, in peacetime, is wide and intermingling is welcome. In wartime, boundary lines are narrow and rigid. The space we wanted to create in the exhibition was one that was open, flexible, and welcoming. This is that same kind of traveling space we should help create for students in our classrooms.

The curator, Catalina Delgado-Trunk, was well-known in Florida for her *ofrendas*. She had won the Division of Cultural Affairs, Folk Art Fellowship in 1998—the only one given in the state that year. Her public *ofrendas* had previously celebrated women weavers and embroiderers, Chicana activists, Mexican men and women in the arts, and many other topics and individuals. The *ofrenda* for the Maitland Art Center was titled, "*Pater Noster* for the St. Patrick's Battalion." Having grown up a block from the site of the Battle of Churubusco where the young Irish and German soldiers from St. Patrick's Battalion fought for Mexico's Independence, in the War of Intervention, she dealt with the borderland between countries, ethnicity, life and death, and her ancestry and history.

Marva Lopez, another Latina artist, created a powerful piece titled "*Morir Soñando*" (Dying Dreaming). She describes it as a torn-down fence somewhere on the Mexico/United States border. The *ofrenda* is an offering to honor people "who have died crossing borders, [having] a dream to live in more humane conditions" (n.p.). Lopez explains that her altar represents a literal border crossing, but it also is a border crossing of themes in that it dismantles borders that separate our understandings of each other by introducing our ideas and concerns into a collaborative effort with artist/friends.

Blanca Moreno and her son Tirso, who are both rooted in the farmworker culture, made an *ofrenda* for Cesar Chavez. Blanca Moreno (1998) wrote, "The reason I chose him was because for the years that I was an agricultural worker, I heard and participated in many of his struggles to change the way the workers in the fields were treated. I feel that he deserves to have something attributed in his honor because of all he has done" (n.p.). She later explained how grateful she was to participate in the exhibition because so few people seemed to be aware of farmworkers and how they live. While she had made *ofrendas* before, she saw her movement itself into an art gallery to participate with people who call themselves "artists" as a border crossing.

Two other Latino artists, Sina Sutter and Mario Shambon, collaboratively created a piece titled "Voices of the Past." It was a way of dialoguing with their Cuban heritage while recognizing cultural traditions that had crossed the waters, remaining dynamic in the United States today.

Non-Latinos used the *ofrenda* form to deal with an issue or idea meaningful to them. Martha Lent, concerned about Florida's over-development and its effect on the wetlands, the water supply, and native plants and animals, wanted to address what happens when humans inappropriately cross "environmental borders."

Glenn Rice crossed space and time in his *ofrenda* titled "Adam and Evolution." He explains that, "although there are many theories, humans are thought to have migrated out of Africa to all other parts of the world,

crossing not only land masses and various climates, but over oceans to the Americas, Europe, and Australia. The evolution spans millions of years, crossing the time border from Proconsul to humanoid forms and the development of tool technologies and cultures" (1999, personal correspondence).
Dennis Schmalstig constructed three canvases that were hung as a triptych. The left canvas portrayed the upsurge of life. Using a German form of altarpiece coupled with the Mexican Day of the Dead tradition, the center portrayed the falling away of life, and the right canvas represented death. Being of German ancestry, he wanted to explore his German fascination with death, seeing it as the greatest border to cross. He also saw his imagery as a representation of the cycles we travel through in life. We go though periods of time, he says, where our old selves die, and we become new people.

Graphic designer Thomas Scott focused on Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, his hometown. What used to be a thriving mill town has crossed a border, becoming decrepit and abandoned. The objects in his *ofrenda* represent defunct businesses from Western Pennsylvania. Focusing on other kinds of passages, Kyle's "Understanding Aliens" is an *ofrenda* that uses the term "aliens" in multiple ways. Focusing on death and afterlife, Kyle explains that "the spirit knows no borders."

Victor Bokas' *ofrenda* titled "The King" pushed the border crossing exhibition of fine and folk art categories into the popular art world. A tribute to Elvis Presley, it is filled with Elvis memorabilia. As it happened, an Elvis Conference was in town the weekend of the opening. Bokas hired an Elvis impersonator to come to the opening. He was to appear mysteriously and disappear and reappear in keeping with Elvis folklore. Unfortunately, he claimed to be too freaked out by the presence of all the *ofrendas* and left the Maitland Art Center without his payment--an unplanned disappearance! Creating altars to Elvis is popular in the United States. Bokas, like many Elvis fans, has a house full of material culture related to Elvis. According to Doss (1999) fans who make altars or shrines to Elvis are making him part of their everyday reality. Like the other *ofrendas*, this one communicates an affection for what has passed, as well as a responsibility to the person or idea being memorized. This *ofrenda* blends the domestic with the divine, private with the public, and the artist's identity with the "King's" identity.

My own *ofrenda* was a tribute to my grandmother, Alma Anders Goranson, who came to the United States from Sweden as a teenager. She married and raised three sons in Bowling Green, Ohio. Her youngest, Ruben Issac, enlisted in the Navy as a pilot during WW II. One day in the South Pacific, on a routine flight, he disappeared. No trace of him or his plane was ever found. My grandmother always thought he was alive, perhaps wounded, and would someday return to her. For thirty years she gave as much blood to the Red Cross as she could. And she continuously crocheted bandages. I believe that these repetitive acts, in her mind, may have been her way of helping Ruben, as she continued to mourn her loss. The cloth pieces in my *ofrenda*, which fall from the drawer of the small wall-mounted dresser and cascade onto the floor, are representative of her bandages. Since she was a cook by profession, I recorded her Swedish recipes on one of them. The other two bandages hold memories and stories about my grandmother sent to me from family members. The cards and newspaper clippings were found in her desk when she died in 1977. Some are prayers about lost souls. The flowers are made from her aprons. Many of the flowers have stamens that are beads with skeletons on them. On the floor, in a small metal container purchased at a local botanica, I placed dirt from El Santuario de Chimayo. This shrine is a located on a New Mexico sacred space where people come to be healed. While this specific dirt is rooted in Mexican and Mexican-American tradition, the Swedes also tell stories about clay used in bread that extended the food during famines (Warshall, 1999). I felt as if my grandmother would have appreciated this specific tribute. My *ofrenda* is about repeating family folklore, healing wounds, understanding complexities, and doing my part, in the tradition of the Mexican Day of the Dead, to comfort and assist my grandmother in her next life.

The "*Ofrendas*/Border Crossings" opening was well attended. Guillermo Gómez-Peña and Roberto Sifuentes attended and did a border crossing performance. While we anticipated some negative response, either from the "religious right" or from Latino groups who might have felt non-Latinos had no place involving themselves in their traditions, these objections never materialized. People of all ages and from all walks of life came and participated. It was the best attended exhibition ever held at the Maitland Art Center. Although artists and participants had suggestions on how the exhibition could have been better, everyone felt it had been successful.

All the artists felt that they had traveled, somehow to a new space and had negotiated the territory there for their benefit. Friedman (1998) believes that "our survival as a species depends on our ability to recognize the borders between difference as fertile spaces of desire and fluid sites of syncretism, interaction, and mutual change" (p. 66).

I believe that we can and should travel into foreign spaces in order to gather inspiration and content for our creative work. So too should our students. However, we must do this in a way that fuses our identities,

expands our means and metaphors for communicating, and helps us understand and explore new ways of creating. In doing so, hopefully, we will create a new language that helps us see the world beyond the binary of black and white. Hopefully, this new space, these borderlands, will be "contact zones" that can dissolve bigotry based on all-too-simplistic cultural conceptions. Traveling to these spaces, however, must be based on an invitation and trusting dialogue. It must allow for differences to mingling, blending, and adapting (Friedman, 1998).

Like the co-mingling between the living and the dead that results from the traditional *ofrenda* display, other border crossings may be made by using the form of the *ofrenda*. I suspect that similar kinds of respectful and meaningful experiences can come from participation in Indian and non-Indian collaborations of kachina dolls or totems. However, to be successful, it must come from collaboration, trust, sharing, and a theoretical understanding that cultural traffic can blend or crash. Teachers need to find ways to negotiate traveling into these spaces with their children. In doing so, they take risks, but they also can offer their students perhaps the best creative experiences of their lives. When I asked Blanca Moreno how she felt about non-Latinos working in an art form that is not a part of their culture she replied, "I was surprised, surprised. It is everybody. It is good. Everybody can do things like this. It is your roots. It is working with them." Her words, I believe, demonstrate a kind of hopefulness for future directions in art education. These directions, or perhaps mappings, can take us to new places and provide us with new understandings.

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